

# Escalating the fight against AIDS

Why should the federal government put up to \$2 billion a year into research and education on AIDS? Other diseases claim more victims, can't be cured and can be as devastating for patients and those who love them.

The National Academy of Sciences has just issued what is in effect a 390-page answer to that question, backing up its urgent call for "the most wide-ranging and intensive efforts ever made against an infectious disease." Otherwise, the academy says, the AIDS epidemic could grow into a national catastrophe.

The academy's report makes a convincing case. Among its facts and projections: Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is inevitably fatal. Its incidence is increasing rapidly. Almost 27,000 cases already have been diagnosed; more than 15,000 of the victims have died. By 1991, the roll of AIDS victims will reach an estimated 270,000 and 179,000 of them will be dead. Medical care for AIDS patients easily could total \$16 billion a year.

In addition, an unknown number of people have AIDS-related complex, a less severe form of illness about which little is known and which may or may not progress to full-blown AIDS. Ominously, an estimated one to two million others have been infected by AIDS virus and are a growing pool of people who may be able to spread AIDS to others. Already, AIDS is beginning to occur outside its major high-risk groups—homosexuals and needle-sharing drug users—as it does in many countries in Africa.

Peculiarities of the AIDS virus make it difficult for researchers to find a good, safe treatment and to develop an effective vaccine. Even though one drug, azidothymidine (AZT) shows promise and is being provided for some patients with specific symptoms, it needs more evaluation and testing; some researchers expect it to have only limited success. The report predicts it will take "at least five years and probably

longer" to develop a vaccine and safe, effective medications.

It's urgently important that money be available to fund all feasible AIDS research. We cannot afford the human and financial costs of allowing such a terrible disease to find a permanent niche in our national life.

Because it will be so long before AIDS can be prevented by vaccine and cured by drugs, the academy's report necessarily calls for a large scale educational campaign to warn people away from behavior that could expose them to the AIDS virus. Such warnings must be explicit, clear and put in simple, easily understood words. And they must be targeted to reach particularly vulnerable groups, such as young people just beginning to be sexually active and urban minorities where the incidence of AIDS is disproportionately high.

The same need to educate young people about the dangers of AIDS and how to avoid exposure to the virus was stressed a few days earlier by Surgeon Gen. C. Everett Koop. Dr. Koop called for AIDS education in public schools starting in the early grades.

These urgent recommendations are difficult for many people to accept. Many parents, who grew up in safer, more protected times, would prefer to postpone teaching their offspring about sex—especially about deviant sexual activities—until they are older. They wish for their children a chance to link sex with love and commitment, not casual encounters and disease. Many adults are still uncomfortable with the explicit language such warnings require. And they would prefer telling young people to abstain from sex before marriage rather than how to use birth control.

But now, education about sex and AIDS in the schools is "a life or death matter," the academy's report correctly concludes. It is too late to wishful-think otherwise.